

INTERVIEW WITH DON GRAY
BY DOROTHE NORTON JANUARY 21, 2003

MS. NORTON: Good afternoon Don. I am happy to meet you. I haven't known you all of these years, but now, we'll be friends!

MR. GRAY: Yeah, right!

MS. NORTON: After the interview is finished it will go in to Washington where it will be transcribed and put into the archives. So, first of all I need to know your birthplace and date.

MR. GRAY: I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on February 14, 1911.

MS. NORTON: You were a Valentine!

MR. GRAY: That's my middle name!

MS. NORTON: Oh, well good! What were your parent's names?

MR. GRAY: Leon C., Clary Gray and my mother's name was Frances Minogue Gray.

MS. NORTON: Sounds French.

MR. GRAY: That's Irish.

MS. NORTON: What were their jobs and education?

MR. GRAY: My father attended some college. He didn't graduate, but he had enough to get him through the paces were he ended up; when he died he had made Assistant City Engineer in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My mother; I don't know how many grades she went through. But you couldn't beat her for trying to get around some of the things that we learned in school! She said, "No, I've been there!" She was mainly a housewife and a darn good one!

MS. NORTON: Where did you spend your early years? Were they all in Grand Rapids?

MR. GRAY: Yes, in Grand Rapids.

MS. NORTON: How did you spend them? What did you do? Did you have certain hobbies or books or special places that you went to?

MR. GRAY: I liked to read very much. I did a lot of reading. When I was in eighth grade I broke my leg skiing and I lay with a cast on from my belly button down to my big toe on my right leg. And I had all kinds of people bringing books in to me so I could read since I couldn't do anything else. I was able to complete my eighth grade while I was laid up. I did a lot of hiking and going around with my buddies. We had a crew; I don't like to call it a gang. We didn't know what gangs were in those days. It was just a bunch of kids! We had our scooters that we made out of boxes and worn out roller skates. We didn't have the fancy ones that you pay a hundred dollars for now! Mainly we had just a lot of kids going around. There was never any criminal problems or anything like that. The closest we came was when we collected all of the Christmas trees one year and took them to an abandoned sand pit. We stacked them all up and set the afire! It was in the city limits. It was in the wintertime. The firemen came and they had an awful time trying to get up the hill to get to the place where we were burning them. It was quite a mess. Mainly just what I thought was a normal bunch of kids out having fun. When the mother called, the kids ran!

MS. NORTON: Did you have any jobs as a child before you graduated from high school?

MR. GRAY: Yeah, I delivered papers, mainly the Sunday papers. Other than that, I was an Alter Boy at Mount Mercy Academy. I went to St. James Catholic School for grade school. I enjoyed that. The Sisters were really nice to me. But there were no jobs until actually, I was in high school. I started working for the Forestry Department of the City of Grand Rapids with the tree trimming gang. I spent four summers working on that, trimming trees in the city of Grand Rapids. Then, after I graduated from high school, I went to college at Michigan State.

MS. NORTON: What high school did you graduate from?

MR. GRAY: Union High School.

MS. NORTON: What year was that?

MR. GRAY: I graduated in 1928.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever hunt or fish as a boy?

MR. GRAY: No. We had no automobiles until I was almost graduated from high school. My father didn't make enough money so that he could take up fishing and hunting and things like that. We spent a lot of time out in the country probing around just looking at things and walking up and down creeks and so forth. I always loved the out of doors.

MS. NORTON: What university did you say you went to?

MR. GRAY: Michigan State.

MS. NORTON: Where is that?

MR. GRAY: East Lansing, Michigan.

MS. NORTON: When did you get your degree?

MR. GRAY: 1932.

MS. NORTON: What degree did you earn?

MR. GRAY: A bachelor of science in Forestry.

MS. NORTON: Did you go any further with your education, or was that enough?

MR. GRAY: That was all for right then.

MS. NORTON: Okay. Who do you think influenced your education and your career tract?

MR. GRAY: My father, for one thing; he was an engineer and he was good at mathematics. I unfortunately didn't inherit his expertise in mathematics. The one that really put me in the line of why I went to Michigan State, and why I took up Forestry was the City Forester of Michigan. His name was Ed Eckert. He was a very prominent state employee. Through his urging, I took up forestry and enjoyed it very much.

MS. NORTON: Did you have any mentors, or courses that especially stuck with you?

MR. GRAY: Only this City Forester, Mr. Eckert. He was the one.

MS. NORTON: Where you ever in the military?

MR. GRAY: Yeah.

MS. NORTON: What years were you in the military?

MR. GRAY: From 1944 to 1946. World War II. "The Big War".

MS. NORTON: What department were you in?

MR. GRAY: I was in the Navy.

MS. NORTON: Where were your duty stations? Where did you start?

MR. GRAY: I started down in Florida for Officer Training. I was appointed as a Lieutenant JG in the Navy. When I completed that I went to San Diego for further training and then I was assigned to the armed guard units at Treasure Island in San Francisco. From there I spent most of my nineteen months in the Pacific Ocean with two trips across the ocean. One was to the Philippines to the Lingayen Gulf. The second was the tour to Okinawa. We were on our way to Okinawa when the war ended. We were in Ulithi Atoll with the war ended. So we celebrated there. Then when we got to Okinawa and unloaded our ship; I had a twenty-six-man gun crew. I was the Commanding Officer of this crew that operated the guns protecting the merchant ship. I was on the merchant ship, Joel Palmer, which was a Liberty ship. It was named after the first Indian Commissioner of the State of Oregon. I always remember that!

MS. NORTON: Well that's great that you have such a good memory!

MR. GRAY: On my last trip back after the war, we ended up at Portland, Oregon and I was decommissioned as I was checked off of my ship by Joel Palmer who was a grandson of the man the ship was named after. I thought that was quite nice.

MS. NORTON: Did you receive any decorations while you were in the service?

MR. GRAY: No, just the usual campaign ribbons, that's all. We didn't fire a shot in anger.

MS. NORTON: So being in the military didn't relate in any way to your employment with FWS?

MR. GRAY: No. Only that I got a raise while I was in the Pacific Ocean!

MS. NORTON: Can you tell me when, and where, and how you met your wife?

MR. GRAY: In high school. I think it was about 1927 when I met her. That was before I went to college. When I went to college, we were apart. I spent one summer on the tree crew with the City Forestry Department and one summer at the Experiment Station in northern Michigan with Michigan State after our summer school on blister rust control for nursery up there. Between my junior and senior year I spent the summer of a trail crew for the U.S. Forest Service on the Clearwater National Forest in Idaho. I really had an enjoyable time there. I thought that was a great experience. When I graduated from college, there were no jobs to be had. And I think because of my dad being in the city administration, he was able to get me a job with the city service department that had to do with sewage disposal and so forth. It didn't have much to do with open spaces and such.

It was garbage collection and sewage measurement and so forth. In 1933 I had put my name in to the federal government as a possibility for employment with the Emergency Conservation Works. ECW. I got an appointment as a junior forester with the U.S. Forest at the Huron National Forest in northeastern Michigan. I spent five and a half years there. I did all kinds of work; road maintenance, tree trimming and tree thinning and measurements and so forth. I was finally assigned as Game Manager for the forest where I had to take all of the responsibilities that the Forest Service were developing at that time to consider the wildlife and fisheries in the forests. I saw that in 1937 the CCC, which I was in, was going to out. I decided to start looking for something permanent. I didn't have a permanent appointment with the Forest Service; it was temporary. I took the Civil Service exam for Refuge Manager with the Bureau of Biological Survey, which I passed and got an appointment as an Assistant Refuge Manager at St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. I reported there in October of 1938. I stayed there until October of 1941. Then I was transferred to the Santee National Wildlife Refuge in South Carolina as the first Refuge Manager. I stayed there until 1944 when I went in to the Navy. When I came out of the Navy, the first thing I did was to find out where the FWS office was. It was Biological Survey then. It was in the Merchandize Mart in Chicago. I made a contact there and got to see the Refuge Chief. I told him that I would like to get out of the south. My wife had contracted malaria down there, and didn't like it. That was one reason why we wanted to get back up north. He asked me if I'd like to go to Horicon so I took it. I stayed there for three years. I was about the third Refuge Manager there. Only half of the refuge had been closed to hunting. The rest of it had been left open. That was my first job when I reported at Horicon; was to put all government land under control of the government. This was a tough job to start with, but it worked out real good. I enjoyed my tour there, it was very nice.

MS. NORTON: Can we go back just a little bit, and can you tell me when and where you got married?

MR. GRAY: Sure, I got married in Grand Rapids, Michigan on May 2, 1934.

MS. NORTON: Wonderful! Wow!

MR. GRAY: This coming May will be sixty-nine years.

MS. NORTON: Did you have any children?

MR. GRAY: Five kids. Two daughters and three boys. My eldest daughter just passed away a year ago last December 21st, in San Francisco. She was a doctor out there. My second daughter was married to Jim Turner who was in the Realty division in Boston. He suffered a brain aneurysm and died while they were moving from Boston out to the western part of the state. So she was left a widow. I have three sons. The eldest is in

Virginia. The second is in Florida. And the third is in the Winona vicinity at Money Creek.

MS. NORTON: What do they do?

MR. GRAY: None of them are in Refuges. My oldest boy is with TRW. He's been working in Virginia on many government contracts that TRW has; particularly in the computer line. My second son works for UPS as a field engineer on computers. My youngest son just retired from the Bureau of Prisons, in the Department of Justice in Sandstone, Minnesota. He did real well. When he got out of the service in Vietnam he started at the sign shop here in Winona and worked here from about 1972 until about 1980. Then he got a chance to go with the Bureau of Prisons in Otisville, New York.

MS. NORTON: Where did you go after you left Horicon?

MR. GRAY: From Horicon I had the opportunity to take over as Manager at Lower Souris, which is now the J. Clark Salyer Refuge in North Dakota. It was one of the refuges that I had looked at while I was in Florida and South Carolina as one of the top refuges in the country. I was real enthused about being able to go up there. I spent eight and a half years at Lower Souris. I always call it that because it's hard to change. I admire J. Clark Salyer who was one of the finest administrators in the Refuge System that I think we've had. Mainly up there, the problem was duck depredations. Of course there was a lot of working with the state and local government units with regard to many water projects in North Dakota at that time.

MS. NORTON: In March of 1958 I was transferred to Winona as Manager of the Upper Mississippi NWR. I stayed here for fourteen years. I enjoyed every minute of it.

MS. NORTON: When did you retire?

MR. GRAY: On St. Patrick's Day in 1972. I was honored beyond description with the Departments Distinguished Service Honor award in June of 1968. It was really something that I could never expect.

MS. NORTON: Did you have promotion opportunities as you were being transferred from place to place?

MR. GRAY: Yeah, practically every move I made was a promotion, which I sure enjoyed.

MS. NORTON: That means you were doing a good job all of those years.

MR. GRAY: Yeah, I tried anyway!

MS. NORTON: How did your career affect your family?

MR. GRAY: It kinds of affected the kids, although they kind of enjoyed moving around and seeing new friends. We were able to move at a time when it didn't interrupt their educational year, which made it real good. They had always either just started or just finished a school year, so it didn't affect the kids too much. They enjoyed it. We tried to make enough interlude so that they had a complete education, both physical and mental. They've all been proud of the fact that I was in the FWS and that I had ended up as a GS-13, which was at the time, and probably still is, a top thing to work for.

MS. NORTON: Did you wife have any problems with these moves?

MR. GRAY: No, she never....I always discussed it with her first. And we went over the pros and cons. She's been a real trooper.

MS. NORTON: What's her first name?

MR. GRAY: Dorothy.

MS. NORTON: Oh, that's an easy one to remember! What kind of training did you receive for these jobs when you first started, as you progressed? Was it all on the job, or did you go to different training classes?

MR. GRAY: It was on the job. There were many opportunities to go to in-house training. For instance, for bird banding; we'd go to different refuges to learn about different problems and how they were handled. It was the same way with being schooled in listening to the employees that were there to get a feeling for the area and to really start learning from the people who were there and knew their way around. You made a decision about whether this was the right way or if you wanted something else to happen. We had, as far as I was concerned; I always liked to listen to the people that I was going to supervising to get their ideas on how best to do things. It was good that way.

MS. NORTON: Did you work with animals when you were on the refuges other than the birds you banded?

MR. GRAY: Yeah, we did a lot of that. We did a lot of banding in the swamps and heads, in the tropics of Florida. We used boom traps and nets and so forth. Up here with the Wood Ducks and geese particularly. I worked with some of the best people that the Service ever had in their employ, in all of these different things. I went to Law Enforcement schools. I went to Recreational school down at Everglades National Park. I spent two weeks down there and a couple of weeks at the University of Wisconsin for further Recreational Management training. I had all kinds of opportunities that were

given to me. That's one thing that I always appreciated from Fran Gillette, when he was the Refuge Supervisor in Minneapolis when I got here. Then Forest Carpenter took over when he went to Washington. They always considered me as a possible material for advancement and gave me the opportunity to do it. It was just a wonderful experience to have such good supervisors who were concerned and wanted to do the best that they could for you.

MS. NORTON: Can you remember your supervisors from when you first started, all of them?

MR. GRAY: The first one was Ed Kreaser at Atlanta for St. Marks. I had one in your branch, one of the greatest guys I ever knew; Jay Kelsey. He was a Game Management Agent in Florida. He was long before your time, I think. He was great. Larry Givens started as my Assistant and rose to be the Refuge Supervisor in Atlanta. He was a wonderful man. He is passed away unfortunately. Jim Silver was the Regional Director down there and he was a prince of a man. Of course, all of our Regional people who were up here, Dan Jansen, and all of the others. I just had the greatest opportunity to advance because of them! They took a liking to me and they said that if there was a chance for me, we'd go at it.

MS. NORTON: How do you feel that the FWS was perceived by people outside of the agency?

MR. GRAY: The hardest one that I had was in Wisconsin when I first got there and closed up all of the rest of the refuge. [Horicon] That cut out the hunting for a lot of people. But yet, we built up the goose population there to two hundred thousand. When I first started there the first count we were able to get was about 3,500 birds. When I left in 1949, it was up to 20,000 just because of closing up the refuge to hunting. The geese started dropping in there. Then, with the farmers up in North Dakota and their duck depredations. That was really a tough situation up there. I went to all of their meetings and tried to counter all of their problems. We did everything we could to take care of the problems that we knew of. We got out of there with a full head of hair and most of the skin on our backs; even after some of the vitriolic meetings we'd have at night. Oh, they were tough! They were willing to listen. Maybe it didn't change their mind, but they figured we had a job to do and we were trying to do it; and we were trying to help them along too. We were trying to work mainly with the State and County officials that made it possible for us to have a smoother operation.

MS. NORTON: What projects were you involved in?

MR. GRAY: I was involved with the CCC Camp at St. Mark's just before it was closed down. Getting started with the Santee NWR was a big job because that was before we had any water, and no building, no nothing. I had to go out and scrounge up people to

hire and things like that. That was a big job. It was mainly a project of just making sure that we had, when I left the refuge was up and running. We had a goal to go for. We had to build dikes, and water control structures and things like that.

MS. NORTON: Were there any major issues that you had to deal with?

MR. GRAY: No, other than the hunting and the waterfowl depredations in North Dakota. That was one of the biggest problems.

MS. NORTON: Who do you think the individuals were who helped shape your career?

MR. GRAY: Well, I think J. Clark Salyer was one. He was the Chief of Refuges. Jim Silver was another one. Fran Gillette and of course Forest Carpenter. He was probably the number one who really helped me. All of the Regional Office supervisory staff never gave me a bad time about anything. I never was called on the carpet or anything like that. I figured I kept my nose fairly clean. I never was dressed down like some people that I have heard of. And I've never had to do that to any of my employees either. I always said that I wanted my people to tell me what we should be doing within the limits of what I set. They worked because they knew that the goals that they set, and if approved by the office, it was up to them to prove that it would work. I just had a real good relationship with my personnel and I think that's one of the biggest things that made it possible for me to get to the point where I did.

MS. NORTON: That's great! Do you remember who the Presidents, Secretaries of the Interior, or Directors of FWS were?

MR. GRAY: Yep. I started with Franklin Roosevelt and the CCC program. Ickes the curmudgeon and Ira Gabrielson was another one. He too was another one who influenced me. He was Director of the Biological Survey and FWS. He was just as ordinary a person as you could ever want to meet. It was just wonderful to have him come down and visit your refuge because you knew he wasn't trying to pick it apart. He was just trying to say, "Show me something that I haven't seen, will you?" He was a guy who would stop when he was driving, instead of like nowadays with everybody flying, he'd pick up dead birds and skin them out and make skins at night in his motel room. He'd do things like that. He was a terrific man. I wish I could remember all of the names.

MS. NORTON: Do you think that when there was a change in administration that it affected the work that we do?

MR. GRAY: I don't think we ever suffered too much. We were always short of money. But I wasn't too concerned about Democrats or Republicans or who was the Director. Al Day was a hell of a good guy. Gottschalk was another one. A lot of this is overblown except when something like this Arctic National Wildlife Refuge thing is up. That's really

something that hits close to home because I had oil development start on Lower Souris Refuge in North Dakota. That was kind of tough too.

MS. NORTON: In your opinion, who do you think the individuals were who shaped the FWS? You started early enough that you could probably see what was happening and who was doing it.

MR. GRAY: There was Ding Darling and Clark Salyer. Art Elmer was Salyer's Chief Assistant. Salyer would go out in the field and promise some Manager something. He'd get back to the office and Art would find out and say, "you can't do that!" That was really good. And the Realty man, Defenbaugh [sounds like Di-fin-bauk] He used to come down to the Refuge at St. Mark's. We had some problems down there. He was an older man but just a wonderful guy. I think Milton Eisenhower came down. He was Assistant Secretary of Agriculture. He'd come down too. Those are people, way back when, but I think it's hard to pick and chose. I don't remember too much of anything other than my acquaintance with the Regional Office staff. I think our Region 3 supervisors and the many problems that the FWS had were exemplary. I don't think that anybody could say they didn't do the best job they possibly could. I think it shows. And I think the FWS has a lot of support with the general public. They had some criticism with individuals, but it's nothing like the CEOs of Enron or stuff like that. My fellow Refuge Managers, for all of the time I was in the FWS were some of the best people in the world. We'd get together and have fun. It was great! We even poked fun at Clark Salyer when he was out at one of our regional conferences.

MS. NORTON: What do you consider to be the high point of your career? Was it when you got the award?

MR. GRAY: I think when I got the Distinguished Service Award.

MS. NORTON: Who presented that to you?

MR. GRAY: His brother was from Arizona. His brother was a Congressman. Oh hell, what's his name? I hate to have it show up on tape how ignorant I am since I can't remember names! [Udall?]

MS. NORTON: That's okay. It was somebody that you didn't work with everyday but saw once in a while. Did you have a low point in your career?

MR. GRAY: No, not particularly. I don't ever feel like the world or the regional office was against me; or the Washington office. I always thought that it was operating in pretty good shape. I never felt in a funk at all.

MS. NORTON: That's good! Did you ever have a dangerous or frightening experience?

MR. GRAY: Not really. I was confronted by a Florida “cracker” down there that was running hogs on the refuge who told me I’d better lay off running hogs off of the refuge after I got there to St. Mark’s. He told me I’d wake up and find myself looking out of a gator hole! No, it was like my military career. Other people tell about all of this enemy fire and so forth, and as I said, I made two trips across the Pacific in convoys and not one of my guns ever fired a shot in anger.

MS. NORTON: So it wasn’t too frightening?

MR. GRAY: No, it wasn’t too frightening, but always, the danger was there.

MS. NORTON: What was the most humorous experience you can remember? Some days everything is humor. Other days it’s all the other way.

MR. GRAY: I think it was some of the various get-togethers at various levels and some of the bull sessions after the meetings when we’d just kind of relax and tell stories. It was just a camaraderie in general. Everybody was doing everything they could to make the situation and the programs work. Putting a little humor in it; a story here and there was real good.

MS. NORTON: What would you like to tell other people about your career and about FWS? Like friends and relatives and people that you meet. You’ve had such a long career with us.

MR. GRAY: I think the fact is that they have to believe in what they are doing first off. They can’t be swayed by an inept mark here and a nasty mark there or an occasional bouquet. You must evaluate and run your business so that the whole program that you are looking for is going to benefit and not be swayed one way or another by what somebody says, or does. As far as I am concerned I don’t think there is any other government agency that can beat what I’ve gone through in my career as an enjoyable experience. If I had to do it over again, I certainly would except for all of the ungodly paperwork that I’ve seen. And I see this happening now!

MS. NORTON: What were some of the changes that you saw in the FWS while you were working, like in the environment and in the personnel? Was there anything you noticed as the years went by?

MR. GRAY: No, I think it was a good move to put all of the employees in uniform. I think that was good because it gave us better exposure and more respect and things like that. When I started out, I was dressed just like this. What kind of authority does somebody dressed like that have when compared to a guy who walks up with a patch on his shoulder and things like that. I think was a real good move and worth every bit of it.

MS. NORTON: What do you think about the future? Where do you think the Service is headed in the next decade or so?

MR. GRAY: I think they are on the right track with regard to wildlife as a whole. For a long time, we didn't look very closely at incidental wildlife like dickey birds and frogs and mammals and things like that. It was ducks and so forth. I think it's a real good thing that they are including the whole biological approach so we take in all of the features of a habitat.

MS. NORTON: Well, we're just about to the end here Don. Is there anything special you'd like to say, or do you have any photographs or documents that you'd want to donate or share with the Service?

MR. GRAY: Well practically all of the stuff is in the files, like our quarterly reports or annual reports. No, I have some personal letters, which are very kind to me. I share them with my family, but I don't think they should go anywhere else.

MS. NORTON: Whom else do you think we should interview now? I've done about fifty now, so I can tell you if we've done them.

MR. GRAY: I am sorry that you haven't been here early enough to interview Bill Greene.

MS. NORTON: I know. I feel badly about that too.

MR. GRAY: Bill Greene was a super guy. I look at my getting the Distinguished Service Award and Bill not getting it. I just, somehow I just don't think it's right that I got it and he didn't! Forest Carpenter was another one.

MS. NORTON: Yes, he was another one. They just started this year before last. We're in our second year now. Forest I think was already gone when this committee started. I worked in the Regional Office all of my career and I knew Forest very well. He was just a very mellow, nice man; but firm in what he believed and in what he wanted done. He was wonderful.

MR. GRAY: Yes indeed.

MS. NORTON: I certainly want to thank you for your time this afternoon, Don. It's nice to meet you!

MR. GRAY: I enjoyed it, it's good to know you!

MS. NORTON: Would you like to have a copy of this tape once it's typed up?

MR. GRAY: Yeah, if you can without any problem.

MS. NORTON: It's not a problem; I've got your address. Thanks very much Don.

MR. GRAY: Well thank you, it's been nice discussing the old times!